



A comparative literary and philosophical analysis of the Bhagavad Gita in English translation: With special reference to A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

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Abstract

The Bhagavad Gita, as a foundational text of Indian philosophical and spiritual thought, has been translated into English through diverse interpretive frameworks, reflecting the varied intellectual and theological orientations of its translators. The translation of such a sacred text extends beyond linguistic conversion, functioning as a site of hermeneutic negotiation where meaning is actively constructed rather than passively transmitted. A central issue in this context is the significant variability in interpretation across English translations, which often results in divergent representations of key philosophical concepts.

This study undertakes a comparative literary and philosophical analysis of select English translations of the Bhagavad Gita, with particular emphasis on Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Adopting a qualitative methodology grounded in comparative textual analysis and hermeneutic inquiry, the research examines variations in stylistic expression, narrative voice, and the interpretation of core philosophical categories such as dharma, karma, and bhakti. Special attention is given to Prabhupada's extensive purports, which frame the text within a distinctly Gaudiya Vaishnava theological paradigm and foreground devotion to Krishna as the ultimate spiritual ideal.

The analysis indicates that Prabhupada's translation advances a strongly theological reading, reconfiguring the Gita as a prescriptive devotional text, in contrast to other English translations that privilege philosophical pluralism or ethical universalism. These findings underscore the role of translation as an inherently interpretive and ideologically inflected process. The study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates in Translation Studies and Comparative Religion by demonstrating how translation mediates not only textual meaning but also philosophical and theological worldviews.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, translation studies, comparative literature, bhakti, hermeneutics, Prabhupada, philosophy of religion

Introduction

1. Background

Global Significance of the Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita occupies a central position in the intellectual and spiritual traditions of India and has achieved enduring global recognition as a profound philosophical and ethical text. Embedded within the epic Mahabharata, it transcends its narrative setting to address universal concerns such as duty, morality, action, and the nature of reality. Its dialogic structure, presented as a conversation between Arjuna and Krishna, enables a multidimensional exploration of human dilemmas, making it relevant across temporal and cultural boundaries (Kalita *et al.*, 2025) ^[1]. Over time, the Gita has attracted the attention of philosophers, theologians, and literary scholars worldwide, contributing significantly to cross-cultural philosophical discourse. Its teachings on dharma, karma, and moksha have been interpreted in diverse ways, allowing the text to function simultaneously as a spiritual guide, a philosophical treatise, and a literary masterpiece. The global appeal of the Gita lies in its ability to accommodate multiple interpretive frameworks, thereby making it a living text that continues to inspire intellectual and spiritual engagement across disciplines (Bayly, 2010) ^[2].

Translation History into English

The translation of the Bhagavad Gita into English marks a critical moment in the cross-cultural transmission of Indian philosophical thought (Bassnett, 2007) ^[3]. One of the earliest and most influential English translations was

undertaken by Charles Wilkins in 1785 under the patronage of the East India Company, introducing the text to a Western readership for the first time (Davis, 2015) ^[4]. This initial translation laid the foundation for a long tradition of English renderings, each shaped by the intellectual, cultural, and ideological context of its translator. Subsequent translations by figures such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Mahatma Gandhi, and A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada reflect a spectrum of interpretive approaches, ranging from philosophical exegesis to ethical reflection and devotional theology. These translations differ not only in linguistic style but also in their underlying hermeneutic strategies, often foregrounding particular aspects of the text while marginalizing others. As a result, the English translation tradition of the Gita exemplifies how translation functions as an interpretive act that mediates meaning through cultural and ideological lenses (Bassnett, 2007) ^[3].

Role in Philosophy, Religion, and Literature

The Bhagavad Gita occupies a unique interdisciplinary position, exerting a profound influence on philosophy, religion, and literature (Nadkarni, 2019) ^[5]. Philosophically, it engages with fundamental questions concerning the nature of the self, the concept of duty, and the relationship between action and renunciation, contributing to major schools of Indian thought such as Vedanta and Yoga. Religiously, it serves as a foundational text for various Hindu traditions, offering pathways to spiritual realization through karma-yoga, jnana-yoga, and bhakti-yoga. In literary terms, the Gita is notable for its poetic composition, symbolic imagery,

and dialogic narrative structure, which have inspired numerous adaptations, reinterpretations, and critical studies. Its influence extends beyond Indian literature, shaping global literary and philosophical movements by providing a framework for understanding ethical conflict and spiritual inquiry (Mandal, n.d.). The multiplicity of its roles underscores its enduring relevance and highlights the importance of examining its translations not merely as linguistic artifacts but as dynamic reinterpretations that continue to shape its reception in diverse intellectual and cultural contexts.

2. Problem Statement

The translation of sacred texts is inherently complex, as it involves not only linguistic transfer but also interpretive engagement shaped by the translator's philosophical, cultural, and theological orientation. In the case of the Bhagavad Gita, English translations exhibit significant variations in meaning, tone, and emphasis, reflecting divergent hermeneutic approaches. These differences challenge the assumption of translation as a neutral or objective process and instead highlight its role as an interpretive act that actively reconstructs meaning.

A particularly important yet underexplored dimension within this field is the distinctiveness of Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, which foregrounds a devotional (bhakti-oriented) interpretation rooted in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. While numerous studies have examined individual translations of the Gita, there remains a lack of focused comparative research that critically situates Prabhupada's translation alongside other English renderings. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of how theological commitments shape translation strategies and influence the philosophical reception of the text. Therefore, there is a need for a systematic comparative inquiry that examines both literary style and philosophical orientation across translations, with particular attention to Prabhupada's distinctive interpretive framework.

3. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How does the translation of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada differ from other English translations of the Bhagavad Gita in terms of literary style and philosophical interpretation?
- To what extent does the concept of bhakti (devotion) shape translational choices and interpretive outcomes in Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is?
- How do other translators construct meaning differently, particularly in their treatment of key philosophical concepts such as dharma, karma, and moksha?

4. Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

- To conduct a comparative literary analysis of selected English translations of the Bhagavad Gita, with special emphasis on Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is.
- To map and analyze the philosophical interpretations presented by different translators, particularly in relation to core concepts such as dharma, karma, and bhakti.

- To identify and critically evaluate the ideological and theological influences that shape translational strategies and interpretive frameworks.

5. Significance of the Study

This study holds significant scholarly value within the fields of Translation Studies and Religious Studies by offering a nuanced understanding of translation as an interpretive and ideologically mediated process. By comparatively examining multiple English translations of the Bhagavad Gita, the research contributes to ongoing debates concerning translator agency, textual authority, and the construction of meaning in cross-cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the study is particularly relevant for the field of comparative hermeneutics, as it highlights how differing interpretive frameworks—philosophical, ethical, and theological—shape the reception of a single canonical text. The focused analysis of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada's translation provides critical insight into the role of devotional ideology in shaping textual meaning, thereby expanding scholarly understanding of sectarian influences in translation practices. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of approaching translations of sacred texts not as fixed representations but as dynamic reinterpretations embedded within specific intellectual and cultural traditions.

Review of Literature

1. Translation Studies Framework

The study of translation has evolved from a predominantly linguistic exercise into a multidisciplinary field that engages with philosophy, culture, and ideology (Rundle, 2014) ^[7]. In the context of sacred texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, translation assumes even greater complexity, as it involves the transmission of metaphysical ideas, ethical principles, and culturally embedded meanings across linguistic boundaries. Contemporary Translation Studies emphasizes that translation is not a neutral or mechanical process but an interpretive act shaped by the translator's positionality, intellectual orientation, and intended audience. This perspective is particularly relevant when examining multiple English translations of the Gita, which reflect diverse hermeneutic strategies and ideological commitments (Sharpe, 1981) ^[8].

Translation as Interpretation (Hermeneutics)

Hermeneutics, the theory and methodology of interpretation, provides a crucial framework for understanding translation as an active process of meaning-making rather than a passive transfer of words (Stefanink & Bălăcescu, 2017) ^[9]. Scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer have argued that interpretation is historically situated, shaped by the interpreter's preconceptions and cultural context. Applying this insight to translation, it becomes evident that translators inevitably bring their own philosophical and theological assumptions to the text, thereby influencing its meaning in the target language.

In the case of the Bhagavad Gita, this hermeneutic dimension is particularly pronounced due to the text's layered philosophical discourse and symbolic richness. Terms such as dharma, karma, and yoga resist direct equivalence in English, requiring interpretive choices that can significantly alter their semantic scope (Komlyk & Bolotnikova, n.d.). For instance, a translator may render

dharma as “duty,” “righteousness,” or “moral law,” each of which carries distinct philosophical implications. These choices are not merely linguistic but deeply interpretive, shaping how readers understand the ethical and metaphysical teachings of the text.

The work of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* exemplifies this hermeneutic approach (Goswami, 2012) ^[11, 27]. His translation is accompanied by extensive purports that guide the reader toward a specific theological interpretation rooted in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. These commentaries function as interpretive interventions, framing the text within a devotional paradigm that emphasizes surrender to Krishna. In contrast, other translators may adopt a more philosophical or universalist approach, allowing for multiple interpretations. This divergence underscores the centrality of hermeneutics in translation, particularly in the context of sacred texts.

Domestication vs Foreignization

Another key theoretical framework in Translation Studies is the distinction between domestication and foreignization, concepts popularized by Lawrence Venuti (Yang, 2010) ^[12]. Domestication refers to the strategy of adapting the source text to the cultural and linguistic norms of the target audience, thereby enhancing readability and accessibility. Foreignization, on the other hand, seeks to preserve the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of the source text, even at the cost of readability, in order to maintain its original context and meaning.

In translations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, these strategies are evident in varying degrees. Domesticated translations often simplify or reinterpret Sanskrit terms to align with Western philosophical or ethical categories, making the text more accessible to a global audience. For example, complex concepts such as yoga may be rendered in generalized terms that resonate with contemporary readers but risk diluting their original philosophical depth. Conversely, foreignizing translations retain key Sanskrit terms and provide detailed explanations, thereby preserving the cultural specificity of the text while demanding greater engagement from the reader.

Prabhupada’s translation represents a unique blend of these strategies. While he retains many Sanskrit terms and provides transliteration and commentary, his interpretive framework is strongly shaped by a specific theological tradition. This results in a form of “theological foreignization,” where the cultural and religious context of the text is preserved but simultaneously directed toward a particular doctrinal understanding. In contrast, translators such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan adopt a more philosophical domestication, interpreting the text in ways that resonate with universalist or humanist perspectives (Shrakasus, n.d.). The tension between these strategies highlights the complex decisions involved in translating sacred texts and the implications of these choices for meaning construction.

Challenges in Translating Sacred Texts

The translation of sacred texts presents a unique set of challenges that extend beyond those encountered in secular translation (Akhtar, 2025) ^[14]. These challenges arise from the intrinsic nature of such texts, which often combine poetic expression, philosophical depth, and theological

significance. The *Bhagavad Gita*, for instance, is composed in a highly stylized Sanskrit verse that integrates literary aesthetics with profound metaphysical insights. Translating this dual character into English requires balancing fidelity to the original text with clarity and coherence in the target language.

One major challenge lies in the untranslatability of key concepts. Terms like moksha (liberation), bhakti (devotion), and atman (self) carry culturally specific meanings that cannot be fully captured through direct equivalents in English. Translators must therefore rely on explanatory strategies, such as footnotes, glossaries, or extended commentaries, to convey these meanings (Dsouza & Rami, 2025) ^[15]. However, these strategies introduce another layer of interpretation, potentially shaping the reader’s understanding in ways that reflect the translator’s own perspective.

Another significant challenge is the question of authority and authenticity. Sacred texts are often regarded as divinely inspired or spiritually authoritative, and any attempt to translate them raises concerns about preserving their original intent. This issue is particularly evident in translations like *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is*, where the translator asserts a specific doctrinal interpretation as the authentic meaning of the text. Such an approach contrasts with more academic translations that seek to present the text in a neutral or open-ended manner, allowing readers to engage with its philosophical complexity independently.

Furthermore, the translator must navigate the interplay between literal accuracy and interpretive clarity. A strictly literal translation may preserve the linguistic structure of the original text but fail to convey its deeper meaning, while a more interpretive translation may enhance understanding at the cost of fidelity. This tension is particularly acute in the translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the richness of the original Sanskrit allows for multiple layers of meaning.

In summary, the Translation Studies framework underscores that translating the *Bhagavad Gita* is not merely a linguistic task but a deeply interpretive endeavor shaped by hermeneutic choices, cultural strategies, and theological commitments (Dsouza & Rami, 2025) ^[15]. The interplay between interpretation, domestication and foreignization, and the inherent challenges of sacred text translation provides a critical foundation for understanding the variations observed across English translations, particularly in the case of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada’s influential work.

2. Major English Translations of the Gita

The English translation tradition of the *Bhagavad Gita* reflects a wide spectrum of interpretive orientations, shaped by the intellectual, philosophical, and ideological positions of individual translators. Each translation not only renders the Sanskrit text into English but also reinterprets its meaning through a distinct conceptual lens. A brief review of major English translations highlights the diversity of approaches and provides a critical foundation for comparative analysis.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan – Philosophical-Humanist Interpretation

The translation by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan is widely regarded as one of the most intellectually rigorous and philosophically grounded interpretations of the *Bhagavad*

Gita. His approach situates the text within the broader framework of Indian philosophy, particularly Advaita Vedanta, while simultaneously engaging with Western philosophical traditions. Radhakrishnan emphasizes the universal and timeless nature of the Gita, interpreting its teachings as expressions of a rational and ethical philosophy rather than sectarian doctrine. His translation is characterized by extensive scholarly commentary, which seeks to reconcile metaphysical concepts with modern philosophical discourse. By foregrounding the unity of spiritual experience and ethical action, Radhakrishnan presents the Gita as a text that transcends religious boundaries and speaks to a global intellectual audience. However, critics have noted that his Universalist approach may, at times, dilute the text's devotional dimensions in favor of philosophical abstraction (Gupta, n.d.).

Bal Gangadhar Tilak – Emphasis on Karma Yoga

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, particularly in his seminal work *Gita Rahasya*, represents a significant departure from renunciatory readings of the text. Tilak foregrounds karma yoga (the path of action) as the central teaching of the Gita, arguing that active engagement in worldly duties, rather than withdrawal, constitutes the highest form of spiritual practice (Paranjpe, 2010) ^[17]. His interpretation is deeply influenced by the socio-political context of the Indian independence movement, where the Gita is read as a call to action and moral responsibility. Tilak's translation and commentary reinterpret the ethical dilemmas faced by Arjuna as symbolic of broader human struggles, thereby positioning the text as a guide for ethical activism. While his emphasis on action provides a dynamic and pragmatic reading, it has been critiqued for prioritizing a particular philosophical strand at the expense of the text's broader metaphysical and devotional dimensions.

Mahatma Gandhi – Ethical-Spiritual Reading

Mahatma Gandhi's engagement with the Bhagavad Gita reflects a deeply personal and ethical interpretation, which he regarded as a "spiritual dictionary" guiding his life and political philosophy. His reading emphasizes the principles of non-violence (ahimsa), self-discipline, and detachment from the fruits of action. Gandhi interprets the battlefield of Kurukshetra metaphorically, viewing it as an internal moral struggle rather than a literal call to war. This allegorical approach allows him to reconcile the text's apparent endorsement of violence with his commitment to non-violent resistance. His translation and commentary prioritize ethical introspection and spiritual self-realization, presenting the Gita as a guide for moral conduct rather than a strictly theological or metaphysical treatise. While Gandhi's interpretation has been influential in shaping modern ethical readings of the Gita, it has also been critiqued for its selective emphasis and departure from the text's literal narrative context (Gandhi, 2009) ^[18].

Eknath Easwaran – Accessible Modern Interpretation

Eknath Easwaran's translation of the Bhagavad Gita is notable for its accessibility and appeal to contemporary readers, particularly those unfamiliar with the complexities of Indian philosophy (Easwaran, 2011) ^[19]. His approach simplifies the language and presents the text in a clear and engaging manner, making it accessible to a global audience. Easwaran emphasizes the practical and psychological

dimensions of the Gita, interpreting its teachings as tools for personal growth, self-mastery, and inner transformation. His commentary often draws parallels with modern life, thereby bridging the gap between ancient philosophy and contemporary concerns. While this accessibility enhances the text's reach, it has been critiqued for occasionally oversimplifying complex philosophical concepts and reducing the depth of the original Sanskrit text.

3. Prabhupada's Contribution

The contribution of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada to the English translation and global reception of the Bhagavad Gita is both distinctive and transformative. Through his work *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is*, Prabhupada not only translated the text but also recontextualized it within a clearly defined theological framework rooted in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition (Kundu, 2024) ^[20]. His approach departs from more neutral or philosophically eclectic translations by foregrounding a specific devotional (bhakti-oriented) interpretation that positions Krishna as the Supreme Personality of Godhead and emphasizes complete surrender (śaraṅgati) as the ultimate spiritual goal.

Devotional Theology (Gaudiya Vaishnavism)

Prabhupada's translation is deeply embedded in the theological principles of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, a devotional tradition that centers on the worship of Krishna as the highest manifestation of the divine. Within this framework, the Bhagavad Gita is interpreted not merely as a philosophical dialogue but as a sacred revelation that affirms the supremacy of bhakti as the most direct and effective path to liberation. Prabhupada consistently interprets key philosophical concepts—such as dharma, karma, and yoga—through a devotional lens, aligning them with the ultimate objective of loving service to Krishna. This theological orientation distinguishes his work from other English translations that may prioritize metaphysical inquiry, ethical reasoning, or Universalist interpretations. By presenting the Gita as a text that unequivocally advocates devotion, Prabhupada redefines its philosophical scope and directs the reader toward a specific spiritual praxis (Bhatia, 2009) ^[21].

Role of Purports

A defining feature of *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* is the inclusion of extensive purports, which accompany each verse and serve as interpretive commentaries (Maitra, 2022) ^[22]. These purports are not merely explanatory notes but function as authoritative theological expositions that guide the reader's understanding of the text. Through them, Prabhupada elaborates on doctrinal positions, clarifies philosophical concepts, and addresses potential ambiguities in the Sanskrit verses. The purports effectively bridge the gap between the original text and its contemporary audience, but they also shape the interpretive trajectory by privileging a particular reading over others. In this sense, the purports transform the translation into a hybrid text that combines scriptural translation with theological instruction. This approach contrasts with more academic translations, where commentary is often limited or presented in a more neutral and analytical manner.

Global Dissemination via International Society for Krishna Consciousness

Prabhupada's impact extends beyond the textual domain through the global dissemination of his translation via the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the movement he founded. ISKCON played a crucial role in popularizing *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts, particularly in the West, where it became one of the most widely circulated versions of the Gita (Krishna *et al.*, n.d.). Through institutional networks, public outreach, and devotional practices, the text was not only read but also lived as part of a broader spiritual movement. This global circulation contributed to the shaping of contemporary perceptions of the *Bhagavad Gita*, especially in non-Indian contexts, where Prabhupada's interpretation often serves as a primary point of engagement with the text. The integration of translation, theology, and institutional dissemination underscores the unique nature of Prabhupada's contribution, highlighting how translation can function as a vehicle for both textual transmission and religious transformation.

4. Research Gaps

Despite extensive scholarship on the *Bhagavad Gita* and its English translations, several critical gaps remain. Existing studies often focus either on philosophical interpretation or on linguistic and stylistic aspects, with limited integration of both. Consequently, the interplay between literary form and philosophical content remains underexplored, particularly in comparative analyses.

Another key gap is the insufficient attention to sectarian hermeneutics. While it is acknowledged that translators are shaped by their cultural and intellectual contexts, few studies critically examine how specific theological traditions influence translation. In the case of *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is*, the Gaudiya Vaishnava framework strongly guides both translation and commentary, yet comparative analyses with more philosophical or universalist interpretations remain limited.

Additionally, translations are often treated as isolated texts rather than part of a broader interpretive continuum. This limits understanding of how different translations interact, reinterpret, or challenge one another.

This study addresses these gaps by integrating literary and philosophical analysis and foregrounding sectarian hermeneutics. By situating Prabhupada's work within a comparative framework, it aims to present translation as an interpretive, ideological, and culturally embedded practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework integrating hermeneutics, comparative literature, philosophy of religion, and translation theory to analyze the interpretive dynamics of English translations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, with particular reference to *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Given the philosophical depth of the text, this multi-layered approach enables a nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed and transformed across translations.

1. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics highlights translation as an interpretive act shaped by the translator's cultural and intellectual context. Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of the "horizon

of understanding," each translation reflects a fusion between the source text and the translator's worldview (Regan, 2012) ^[24]. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, this is evident in the varied interpretations of key concepts.

A key tension exists between authorial intent and reader-response. While traditional approaches seek fidelity to the original meaning, modern perspectives recognize that meaning is co-constructed by readers. Prabhupada's translation privileges a specific theological interpretation, whereas other translators allow greater interpretive openness.

2. Comparative Literature Approach

The comparative literature framework enables cross-textual analysis of multiple translations, treating them as interconnected rather than isolated works. By examining linguistic, stylistic, and conceptual variations, this approach reveals how translators construct meaning differently.

Stylistically, translations vary in tone, narrative voice, and balance between poetic form and explanatory content. Prabhupada's work adopts a doctrinal and didactic style supported by extensive commentary, while other translations tend toward more neutral or literary expression. This comparison demonstrates how literary form influences philosophical interpretation.

3. Philosophy of Religion

The analysis is grounded in key philosophical concepts of the *Bhagavad Gita*, including dharma (duty), karma (action), bhakti (devotion), and moksha (liberation). These concepts are interpreted differently across translations, shaping the text's ethical and metaphysical meaning. In particular, Prabhupada foregrounds bhakti as the central path, while other translators present a more pluralistic philosophical framework.

4. Translation Theory

Translation theory emphasizes the role of ideology in shaping translational choices (Munday, 2007) ^[25]. Translators interpret texts through their own cultural and theological perspectives, making translation an inherently value-laden process. Prabhupada's work exemplifies ideological translation, as it consistently reflects Gaudiya Vaishnava theology.

The concept of translator visibility, as proposed by Lawrence Venuti, is particularly relevant (Venuti, 2012) ^[26]. In *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is*, Prabhupada's presence is explicit through extensive purports, positioning him as both translator and interpreter. This contrasts with more neutral translations where the translator remains relatively invisible.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine literary and philosophical variations across English translations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, with a primary focus on *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Given the emphasis on meaning, interpretation, and textual nuance, qualitative analysis enables a deeper exploration of linguistic, stylistic, and ideological dimensions that quantitative methods cannot capture.

1. Research Design

The study employs qualitative comparative textual analysis to examine how meaning is constructed through language,

style, and commentary. Grounded in hermeneutic principles, it explores interpretive diversity rather than seeking a single authoritative meaning, focusing on how translators shape textual understanding.

2. Selection of Texts

The primary text is *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is*, selected for its strong theological orientation and global influence. Comparative analysis includes translations by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Mahatma Gandhi, and Eknath Easwaran, representing philosophical, ethical-spiritual, and modern-accessible interpretations. This selection ensures a balanced comparison across diverse interpretive frameworks.

3. Analytical Parameters

The analysis is structured around three dimensions:

- **Literary:** Language style, tone, and narrative voice, highlighting differences in readability and interpretive framing.
- **Philosophical:** Interpretation of key concepts such as dharma, yoga, and bhakti, revealing varying philosophical priorities.
- **Structural:** Use of commentary, particularly the extensive purports in *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is*, which shape reader interpretation compared to minimal commentary in other translations.

4. Analytical Method

The study employs a three-step analytical process:

- **Close Reading:** Detailed examination of selected verses to identify linguistic and stylistic nuances.
- **Thematic Coding:** Identification and comparison of recurring themes such as duty, action, devotion, and liberation.
- **Comparative Interpretation:** Synthesis of findings to highlight patterns of convergence and divergence, linked to broader theoretical frameworks such as hermeneutics and ideological translation.

Comparative Analysis

This section examines selected English translations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, focusing on *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in comparison with translations by Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. The analysis highlights how literary style, philosophical interpretation, commentary, and ideology shape translation as an interpretive act.

1. Literary Analysis

Significant differences emerge in language, style, and narrative authority. Prabhupada's translation combines simple English with doctrinally loaded terminology such as "Supreme Personality of Godhead," creating a layered and theologically driven text. In contrast, Gandhi employs a minimal and accessible style oriented toward ethical reflection, while Radhakrishnan uses a formal and philosophically dense language rooted in metaphysical discourse.

In terms of style, Prabhupada prioritizes explanation over poetic expression through extensive purports, whereas Gandhi retains a reflective simplicity and Radhakrishnan balances poetic form with philosophical exposition. Narrative authority is also more pronounced in Prabhupada's work, where commentary directs

interpretation, compared to the more open and analytical tones of Gandhi and Radhakrishnan.

2. Philosophical Interpretation

Prabhupada's translation presents a clear theological framework in which Krishna is the Supreme God and bhakti is the ultimate path (Goswami, 2012) ^[11, 27]. Concepts such as dharma, karma, and yoga are interpreted within a devotional context, culminating in the primacy of surrender to Krishna.

By contrast, Gandhi offers an ethical reading, interpreting the Gita as a guide to moral action and self-discipline, often viewing the battlefield metaphorically. Radhakrishnan provides a metaphysical interpretation, emphasizing the unity of atman and Brahman and recognizing multiple paths—knowledge, action, and devotion—as equally valid. These variations reflect differing philosophical priorities across translations.

3. Role of Commentary

The use of commentary marks a key distinction. Prabhupada's extensive purports function as authoritative guides that shape reader interpretation and integrate translation with theology (Sutton, 2020) ^[28]. In contrast, Gandhi provides minimal commentary focused on ethical reflection, while Radhakrishnan includes scholarly notes that contextualize without prescribing a singular meaning. This difference highlights varying degrees of translator intervention.

4. Hermeneutic Differences

Hermeneutically, Prabhupada's translation is prescriptive, offering a fixed theological interpretation with limited scope for alternative readings. Gandhi and Radhakrishnan adopt more open approaches, preserving interpretive plurality and allowing multiple philosophical perspectives.

While the *Bhagavad Gita* inherently accommodates diverse spiritual paths, Prabhupada consolidates this plurality into a bhakti-centered framework. In contrast, Gandhi and Radhakrishnan maintain a more inclusive understanding, emphasizing ethical unity and philosophical synthesis.

5. Ideological Influence

The ideological dimension is evident in the contrast between sectarian and Universalist readings. Prabhupada's translation reflects Gaudiya Vaishnavism, presenting a coherent but doctrinally specific interpretation centered on devotion to Krishna. Conversely, Gandhi and Radhakrishnan adopt Universalist approaches, emphasizing the Gita's broader philosophical and ethical relevance, though sometimes at the cost of its specific theological context.

Discussion

The comparative study of English translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* demonstrates that translation is not a neutral linguistic exercise but a process of interpretive reconstruction, shaped by the translator's philosophical and ideological commitments. In the context of sacred texts, translation involves not only language transfer but also the mediation of theological and ethical meanings, resulting in multiple interpretive possibilities.

Translation as Interpretive Reconstruction

The findings affirm that translation is inherently interpretive. Core concepts such as dharma, karma, and moksha lack fixed equivalents in English and require contextual interpretation, leading to diverse meanings across translations. Variations in style, structure, and explanatory depth further influence how readers engage with the text. Thus, translation functions as a creative and intellectual act that reshapes meaning rather than merely reproducing it.

Prabhupada's Theological Reconstruction

Within this framework, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada's *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* represents a distinctive case of theological reconstruction. The text is presented as a doctrinal work centered on Krishna's supremacy and the primacy of bhakti. The extensive purports function as authoritative interpretive tools, guiding readers toward a specific devotional understanding. While this approach ensures clarity and coherence, it also narrows the interpretive plurality traditionally associated with the Gita.

Impact on Global Readership

Through the global outreach of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Prabhupada's translation has significantly shaped modern reception of the Bhagavad Gita, particularly among international audiences. Its accessibility and clear theological framing make it an influential entry point for many readers. However, this influence also frames the Gita predominantly as a devotional text, potentially limiting awareness of its broader philosophical diversity.

Tension between Philosophy and Devotion

A key insight of this study is the tension between philosophical plurality and devotional specificity. While the Bhagavad Gita accommodates multiple paths—jnana, karma, and bhakti—Prabhupada prioritizes devotion as the ultimate path. In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan maintain more pluralistic interpretations, emphasizing ethical practice and metaphysical inquiry. This divergence reflects broader debates between faith and reason, highlighting translation as a site where competing interpretations are negotiated.

Overall, the discussion reinforces that translations of the Bhagavad Gita are shaped by the interplay of interpretation, ideology, and context. Prabhupada's work exemplifies how translation can transform a philosophical text into a theological framework, while other translations preserve interpretive openness. This underscores the role of translation in actively shaping the meaning and reception of sacred texts.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the English translations of the Bhagavad Gita through a comparative literary and philosophical lens, with particular emphasis on *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. By integrating insights from hermeneutics, comparative literature, philosophy of religion, and translation theory, the research has demonstrated that translation is not a neutral or purely linguistic act but a complex process of interpretation shaped by ideological, theological, and cultural frameworks.

A comparative review of major English translations of the Bhagavad Gita reveals that each translator constructs meaning through a distinct interpretive framework shaped by their philosophical orientation and contextual motivations. The philosophical-humanist approach of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the action-oriented emphasis of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the ethical-spiritual reading of Mahatma Gandhi, and the accessible modern interpretation of Eknath Easwaran collectively illustrate the plurality of interpretive possibilities inherent in the Gita. These variations underscore the fundamentally interpretive nature of translation and highlight the role of ideological, cultural, and philosophical influences in shaping textual meaning. Within this diverse landscape, the work of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada introduces a distinctly devotional perspective that further expands the interpretive spectrum of the Gita in English.

Prabhupada's contribution to the English translation tradition is particularly significant due to its explicit theological orientation, strategic use of purports, and global dissemination through the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. In *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is*, translation is not limited to linguistic rendering but extends into doctrinal exposition, where commentary functions as an interpretive mechanism guiding the reader toward a specific devotional understanding. This approach exemplifies how translation operates as an ideologically driven and culturally embedded practice, offering a coherent yet prescriptive reading that both enriches and reshapes the interpretive landscape of the Gita.

The theoretical framework employed in this study—integrating hermeneutics, comparative literature, philosophy of religion, and translation theory—provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing these variations. Hermeneutics foregrounds the interpretive nature of translation, emphasizing the role of the translator's horizon of understanding. Comparative literature facilitates systematic cross-textual analysis, enabling the identification of stylistic and conceptual divergences. The philosophy of religion contributes conceptual depth by examining key ideas such as dharma, karma, bhakti, and moksha, while translation theory highlights the ideological dimensions of translational practice, particularly in relation to translator visibility and doctrinal positioning. Together, these perspectives enable a nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and transformed across translations.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and comparative textual approach that integrates close reading, thematic coding, and interpretive synthesis. By focusing on literary, philosophical, and structural parameters, the analysis captures the multi-layered nature of translation, revealing how language, style, and commentary interact to shape meaning. The central focus on *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* allows for an in-depth examination of devotional hermeneutics, while the inclusion of other translations provides a broader comparative context. This methodological design ensures analytical rigor and supports the development of nuanced insights into the dynamics of translation.

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that English translations of the Bhagavad Gita are shaped by a complex interplay of literary style, philosophical orientation, hermeneutic strategy, and ideological commitment.

Prabhupada's translation stands out for its strong theological focus, extensive commentary, and prescriptive interpretive stance, which contrasts with the more open, pluralistic, and philosophically oriented approaches of Gandhi and Radhakrishnan. These differences highlight the varying degrees of translator intervention and the ways in which interpretive authority is constructed within each translation. The discussion reinforces the central argument that translation is not merely a linguistic process but a dynamic act of interpretive reconstruction. Prabhupada's work exemplifies this by transforming the Gita into a theological document that resolves philosophical plurality into devotional unity. At the same time, other translations preserve a degree of interpretive openness, emphasizing ethical reflection and philosophical inquiry. This tension between devotion and philosophy reflects broader debates within the study of religion and underscores the richness of the Gita as a text capable of sustaining multiple readings. In conclusion, this integrated analysis affirms that the translation of the Bhagavad Gita is a complex and evolving process shaped by the interplay of language, interpretation, and ideology. By examining the distinctive contribution of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada alongside other major translators, the study highlights the diverse ways in which the Gita is reimagined in English. Ultimately, translation emerges not merely as a means of accessing the text but as a transformative practice that redefines its meaning across cultural and intellectual contexts.

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